



Remarks Kuwaiti Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Mohammed Al-Sabah after Their Meeting

Secretary Colin L. Powell

C Street Entrance
Washington, DC
April 14, 2003

(10:15 a.m. EDT)



SECRETARY POWELL: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I just had an excellent conversation with my colleague Dr. Mohammed, and in our conversation I had the opportunity to express the sincere thanks of President Bush and all of my colleagues in the administration and the American people, and, of course, General Tommy Franks for the absolutely superb support that Kuwait has provided to Operation Iraqi Freedom. Without that support, I'm not sure the operation could have been conducted. Kuwait understood the threat, was willing to step forward, and we are deeply appreciative of all they have done.

And I am especially appreciative of the fact that the Minister and I spent most of our time not on the military campaign, but on the future, the humanitarian aid that will be required, the reconstruction activity that will be needed, and our commitment to make sure that the new Iraqi government is based on democratic principles, that it is prepared to live in peace with its neighbors.

And we also discussed how these developments in recent weeks open up new opportunities with respect to peace in the Middle East and greater cooperation among members of the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League.

We also discussed the meetings that will be taking place in Nasiriya tomorrow that begins the formation of the new political system for the new Iraqi government, and how it must respect, as we go forward, the territorial integrity of Iraq -- this process -- and how we are hopeful that these conversations beginning tomorrow and going on into the future in many different places throughout Iraq will be able to take into account the interests and equities of all the people of Iraq and give an opportunity to participate in the political process, both for those who have been outside of Iraq struggling for these many long years to bring about this change, as well as those inside Iraq who are now free of this dictatorial regime.

In our discussions, we also talked about Syria, and hopeful that Syria will understand its obligations in this new environment.

And I also made a point of mentioning to the Minister that we were concerned about some of the looting that took place in the museum in Baghdad, one of the great museums in the world, and the United States will be working with a number of individuals and organizations to not only secure the facility but to recover that which has been taken, and also to participate in restoring that which has been broken.

I have been in touch with the European Union Presidency this morning, Foreign Minister Papandreou, who has experience in such matters. We are also in conversations with UNESCO. But the United States understands its obligations and will be taking a leading role with respect to antiquities in general, but this museum in particular.

Mr. Minister, it's a great pleasure to have you here, and again, thank you for all you have done.

MINISTER AL-SABAH: Thank you, Mr. Secretary. I expressed today Kuwait's appreciation for the work that the United States is doing in liberating the Iraqi people from their ordeal. I also discussed with the Secretary, in addition to the points that he just mentioned, also discussed with him ways of more intense cooperation between our forces and agencies to find the Kuwaiti POWs who are still unaccounted for in Iraq. One out of every 1,000 Kuwaitis is still unaccounted for in Iraq, and this is something that the Secretary has indicated the United States' utmost concern about, and we agreed to expedite and strengthen our cooperation on this issue.

We also discussed the elements of stability in the region-wide area, and this is the Arab-Israeli conflict and the need to get back and to put this track on its proper registration.

We expressed our need to intensify our consultation because the challenges ahead of us is now very, very real, but we are all optimistic about the future. Thank you.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, how serious is the border problem with Syria? Are there many potential war criminals getting across that border?

SECRETARY POWELL: I can't quantify how many might be slipping across the border. The basic point is that the card deck of 55, 53, plus others who have knowledge about weapons of mass destruction development activity over the years, plus those who are in other senior political leadership positions in the former regime or in the Baath Party, these are the kinds of individuals who should not be allowed to find safe haven in Syria. And this is a point that we have made to the Syrians directly and will continue to make the Syrians.

And as the President noted over the weekend, we are concerned that Syria has been participating in the development of weapons of mass destruction and, as the President noted, specifically on chemical weapons. And we believe, in light of this new environment, they should review their actions and their behavior, not only with respect to who gets haven in Syria and weapons of mass destruction, but especially the support of terrorist activity.

And so we have a new situation in the region and we hope that all the nations in the region will now review their past practices and behavior.

QUESTION: (In Arabic.)

MINISTER AL-SABAH: (In Arabic.)

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, can you say, and can the Foreign Minister also comment on this, whether you have been in touch with the Syrian Government on the question of chemical weapons and biological recently, and whether you have asked them to return people within their borders? And do you know if the border is, indeed, closed, as they said it was last week?

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, we are told the border is closed, but, as you know, it's a rather porous border; and so when you say it's closed, it might mean the main roads are closed, but whether or not others are able to get across the border is something that I can't speak to. But once they get into Syria and start heading to Damascus, I would expect that Syrian authorities would do everything they could not to provide these people safe haven.

Syria is well aware of our concerns with respect to weapons of mass destruction and with respect to terrorist activity. It is a subject of discussion with the Syrian leadership whenever we meet with them. Our ambassadors have been making demarches. I've been there twice. Ambassador Burns, Assistant Secretary Burns, has also talked to the Syrians on a regular basis about this. It is no secret to the Syrians about our concern over these kinds of developments.

MINISTER AL-SABAH: Well, we have our own list of the Iraqi war criminals and we are going to pursue them all over the world wherever they are found.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, are you going to release the roadmap --

SECRETARY POWELL: Excuse me. Let's do this gentleman.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, can you please tell us if you have asked your Kuwaiti counterpart to intervene in this message?

(In Arabic.)

SECRETARY POWELL: I will yield to him for that answer.

MINISTER AL-SABAH: (In Arabic.)

QUESTION: And for the English speakers?

SECRETARY POWELL: Yeah, would you?

MINISTER AL-SABAH: Well, I have not been given a specific message to carry to Syria. The Secretary, he can reach the Syrians directly, and I think that Syria can play a constructive role in establishing security and stability in the region.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, it means that you are soon going to release the roadmap? How do you see Syria under this regime as a partner for peace process?

SECRETARY POWELL: We'll be releasing the roadmap as soon as Mr. Abu Mazen has been confirmed by a vote of confidence as the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority with his new cabinet.

Obviously, as we go down the road to peace, we want it to be a comprehensive peace and, ultimately, of course, that would have to include finding a way to settle the outstanding issues with Syria, as well.

QUESTION: Secretary Powell, are you satisfied with the way the meeting is developing in Nasiriya? There are some complaints among some of the Iraqi exile community that Chalabi is not being invited. Do you think that there is going to be a lot of turmoil amongst those Iraqi exiles, particularly outside the country who maybe do not feel like they are sufficiently involved at the moment?

And to the Kuwaiti Foreign Minister, can you confirm whether Kuwaiti prisoners of war were, indeed, located this morning in Baghdad? Thank you.

SECRETARY POWELL: With respect to the meetings that begin in Nasiriya tomorrow, let's remember this is just the first of many meetings that will be held, and in order to get the process started it was determined that we should have representatives of the various groups at this meeting. And it will be a fairly large gathering of individuals. It will be chaired initially by Ambassador Khalilzad, the President's Personal Representative. Of course, the individuals have been invited by General Franks, and then General Garner will address the group, and then Ambassador Ryan Crocker will moderate the proceedings.

So I think it's a good start, and I think most of the groups outside the country in the resistance understand the need for starting in this way, with a modest beginning, so that we begin a dialogue. And so I don't think there is much concern about this not being a productive meeting, and also a meeting that reflects the views of those who have been struggling outside, as well as those who are now free inside.

MINISTER AL-SABAH: This is a breaking news story and I don't have really any confirmation on it.

SECRETARY POWELL: Nor do I.

QUESTION: Secretary Powell, are you -- sir, are you considering any measures against Syria in light of the allegations that you've made, perhaps recalling the U.S. Ambassador, downgrading U.S. relations -- anything along that?

And also, in addition, on the humanitarian front, many nongovernmental organizations, the International Red Cross and others, have complained that the security situation is so bad on the ground that they can't get the aid in there. Is there anything the U.S. is considering to do to beef up security?

And for Dr. Mohammed, sir --

SECRETARY POWELL: That's two already, thank you.

With respect to Syria, of course we will examine possible measures of a diplomatic, economic or other nature as we move forward. We are in touch with Syrian authorities. We have a very effective Ambassador there, Ambassador Kattouf, who will stay in touch with them and make them aware of our concerns. And we'll see how things unfold as we move forward.

With respect to the humanitarian situation, it is improving on a daily basis. Secretary Rumsfeld gave us a report this morning of the various military civil affairs units working with our combat troops to slowly reestablish security and stability throughout the various cities. We are starting to hire again police forces in the south, and that will be expanded as we move north. And there is a huge amount of humanitarian equipment and supplies that are now moving in. Hospital kits are moving in to reestablish healthcare. Water is beginning to flow in the southern cities. And there is a great deal that is going on, but the campaign is not yet over and so I think, as you see, day by day the situation will improve and the NGOs and other humanitarian organizations and UN organizations will be able to accomplish their work.

There is not a shortage of food. Food is adequate in marketplaces, as well as food being brought in from the outside. We want to go to work on the healthcare system and the water system and getting the power on throughout the country, which tends to affect the water supply system, since you need power to run it in the first place. So we're seized with the problem, hard at work on the problem, and the situation will improve day by day.

Thank you.

(The Secretary escorts the Minister to his car.)

QUESTION: Are you all going -- are you personally going to be in touch with your counterpart in Syria to discuss what the President said yesterday?

SECRETARY POWELL: I am sure we will be in touch in a variety of diplomatic channels. And I usually don't talk about my future phone calls until they become my past phone calls -- or visits.

QUESTION: Who else have you talked to this morning? What else have you been doing with respect to Iraq and Syria?

SECRETARY POWELL: I have spoken to the Foreign Minister of Greece on behalf -- and he's the Presidency of the European Union, but otherwise I've been in meetings and now I will go back to other matters.

Released on April 14, 2003

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